

Evaluation of Fundamental Attribution Error

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THE EVALUATION OF THE FUNDAMENTAL ATTRIBUTION ERROR

When explaining other people's behaviour, internal or external attribution of a cause are made. Internal or dispositional attributions relate to the individual (eg: personality characteristics) and external or situational attributions are the environment (Heider 1958). It is assumed by researchers that attribution is a process similar to that of perception.

However, there is an overemphasis on internal attributions compared to external. This is an attributional bias known as the "fundamental attribution error" (FAE)(Ross 1977).

More recently, Ross and Nisbett (1991) preferred to talk of "dispositionism": "... people (1) infer dispositions from behaviour that is manifestly situationally produced, (2) overlook situation context factors of substantial importance, and (3) make overly confident predictions when given a small amount of information" (p126).

1. Simple internal-external dichotomy

Attributions are more complex than either internal or external factors as causing the behaviour. In fact, both types of attribution exist depending on how the behaviour is viewed. For example, the statement "Jill bought the house because she wanted privacy" seems an obvious internal attribution. It is the behaviour of Jill that is the origin of the behaviour. But the seclusion offered by the house could be the cause of the behaviour, and this produces a situational explanation (Ross 1977). Behaviour should be understood as a combination of person and situation (Sabini et al 2001).

Gilbert and Malone (1995) felt that too much emphasis was put on the metaphor of "the human skin as a special boundary that separates one set of 'causal factors' from another. On the sunny side of the epidermis are the external or situational forces that press inward on the person, and on the meaty side are the internal or personal forces that exert pressure outward" (p21).

2. How attribution is studied

Traditionally, attribution is studied in laboratory experiments where individual's attributions are measured on Likert-type scales. This reduces the subtlety of attribution to numerical scores, and takes it out of real-life situations: "meaning may depend upon subtle features of research context and instruction, features often beyond the experimenter's knowledge or control" (Ross 1977).

Also the FAE appears when measured by pencil and paper means, but not face-to-face (Winter and Uleman 1984).

Steiner (1974) has argued that attribution research is too individualistic.

3. The FAE is learned

The FAE only appears in later childhood, whereas young children focus on the situation (Kassin and Pryor 1985).

4. The FAE is not universal

The FAE is evident in Western societies, but not the same in non-Western cultures (Norenzayan and Nisbett 2000). In this case, "It is, then, hardly fundamental" (Smith and Bond 1993 p107).

5. The FAE is influenced by mood

The mood of the individual can influence the presence of the FAE with happy moods increasing its strength and sad moods reducing it (Forgas 1998).

6. Theoretical challenges

The phenomenological approach challenges the basis of the FAE which is objective thought, and the clear division of inside/outside, internal/external. It moves away from the search for causal laws in the experiment to focus upon subjective, lived experience. In terms of the lived experience, in everyday life "people apparently find the attribution of dispositions and traits useful" (Langridge and Butt 2004).

"It does not matter whether a person is right or wrong in their perception; the focus is always on their perception of the world 'in its appearing': nothing more, nothing less. All reference to reality is set aside.. because phenomenological social psychologists believe that all we have to work with is people's experience" (Langridge 2007 pp99-100).

Lalljee (1996) had a problem with the use of "error" or "bias" because "They smack of the implication that there is a 'correct' answer, and an 'unbiased' way of processing information or making attributions; and the layperson is inadequate in this regard" (p108). He preferred to see the FAE as a "powerful tendency".

7. What is the FAE?

Ross and Nisbett (1991) explained the FAE as a tendency to attribute behaviour to dispositional factors rather than situational factors, while Sabini et al (2001) saw it as due to underestimating the importance of certain factors.

One of those factors, for Americans, is the motive to save face and to avoid embarrassment. This action is traditionally seen as important in non-Western cultures, like Japan, and ignored in the West.

Sabini et al (2001) defined embarrassment as "an aversive emotional state rooted in social interaction, involving flustering and the desire to hide, flee

from, or dissolve the immediate social situation" (p2). It is often produced by the loss of face or "face threatening acts" (Brown and Levinson 1978) which show that "someone (self or other) is less worthy than their role requires them to be" (Sabini et al 2001 p2). The avoidance of embarrassment makes individuals to manipulate, and this is often overlooked by observers.

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